

The Royal Academy Exhibition, 1918

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IT is quite possible that to the ordinary man the 1918 Academy will seem rather unexciting because there are in it few things which are sensational or surprising. The public are apt to judge an exhibition less by its general merit than by the occasional pieces of work in it which are remembered because they are unusual in subject or treatment—in the minds of most people only the special performances count as important, and the rest of the collection matters not at all. But this way of estimating a show is altogether wrong: in any representative gathering of works of art it is their average quality that ought to be considered first, and the exceptional things should seem important only because they help to raise the average. Even when there are two or three notable achievements in a commonplace collection the exhibition as a whole is not a good one, for the commonplaces lower the average and drag the notable works down with them, and the general atmosphere which results is one of inefficiency.

But certainly it would not be right to call the Academy this year inefficient. On the contrary, it includes a larger proportion of sound and serious work than usual, and it is distinguished by an exceptional consistency of effort. There are very few really incompetent things in it, even those which do not present any very brilliant idea are carried out sincerely and with a conscientious intention, and there are many in which both the intention and the achievement can be heartily commended. To the student of art such an exhibition is full of significance, because it proves that the standard of artistic practice throughout the country is being thoroughly maintained, and that our artists instead of being depressed by present-day conditions of existence have been stiffened in their resolve to do their best. Since the war began British art has appreciably gained in stability and in steadfastness of purpose, and this gain is even more evident now than it was last year. This is, indeed, a hopeful sign of the times, for, as the spirit of a people is reflected in the art which it produces, the strengthening of the artistic sentiment implies a development in the character of the nation, and a hardening in the popular resolve to fight things out to the end.

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In other ways, however, the war has not perceptibly affected the Academy. There is no large number of battle pictures, and what there are do not claim any special attention, and of symbolical or imaginative compositions inspired by the war there are fewer still. The canvases which most deserve to be noted are mainly of the type with which we have become familiar in past years—there are some good portraits, a few figure paintings of real interest, many excellent landscapes, and a fair gathering of other kinds of production which cannot be exactly classified; but no one can fairly be said to have obviously broken new ground, and there are no rash or ill-considered experiments.

Among the portrait painters the places of highest distinction must be given to Mr. J. J. Shannon and Mr. Melton Fisher—Mr. Shannon's *Lady Broughton* and *Miss Bruce Ward* are as fine as anything he has ever produced, and Mr. Fisher's *Madame Lucchesi Bacci* and *Estelle* are masterly achievements of exquisite charm—but there is admirable work from other artists like Mr. Fiddes Watt, Sir John Lavery, Mr. F. O. Salisbury, Mr. W. Llewellyn, Mr. M. Milbanke, Mr. Charles Shannon, Mr. Greiffenhagen, and Mr. Charles Sims, to quote a few of those who are prominent in this branch of practice. The best landscapes are by Mr. D. Y. Cameron, Mr. B. Priestman, Sir David Murray, Sir E. A. Waterlow, Mr. Alfred Parsons, and Mr. Arnesby Brown, whose *Evening* is a most fascinating transcription of Nature; and there is a small snowy landscape of rare merit by Mr. Sims. Figure pictures of memorable quality are contributed by Mr. Anning Bell, Mr. S. Reid, Mr. J. J. Shannon, Mr. E. Board, Mr. Bernard Partridge, and Mr. Cadogan Cowper; and things of special interest come from Mr. A. J. Black, Mr. W. Knight, Mr. Tom Mostyn, Mr. H. A. Olivier, Mr. Campbell Taylor, Mr. Terrick Williams, Mr. Coutts Michie, Mr. Spencer Watson, Mr. Bertieri, Mr. Richard Jack, Mr. Harold Speed, Mr. Herbert Draper, and Mr. Hacker—the portrait of Sir Frank Short by Mr. Hacker is one of the most vivid character studies in the show, and his composition, *The Watchers*, is dignified and impressive.

The sculptors best represented are Sir Thomas Brock, Mr. Drury, Mr. Pomeroy, Mr. Derwent Wood, Mr. Mackennal, Sir Hamo Thornycroft, Mr. Reynolds-Stephens, Sir W. Goscombe John, Mr. Gilbert Bayes, and Sir George Frampton.